Ira Keller (1899-1978)

The Keller Fountain at Southwest Fourth and Clay in Portland memorializes Ira Keller, the long-time, autocratic chair of the Portland Development Commission (PDC). Keller—controversial, committed, and temperamental—served as PDC's first chair. At the time of his death in 1978, the *Oregon Journal* noted that Keller had early on announced that all PDC decisions were going to be unanimous—with the strong implication that they were going to be his.

Born in Portland, Maine, on February 2, 1899, Keller served in the U.S. Army during World War I and graduated from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York, in 1920. He worked for six years for other national corporations before transferring in 1926 to the Container Corporation of America in Chicago. By 1946, he was executive vice president of the company.

Keller retired to Portland in 1953, but he did not slow down. By the time Portland's popular new mayor Terry Schrunk was elected in 1956, Keller had founded Western Kraft, a paper products company with a lumber mill in Albany (the company would merge with timber-giant Willamette Industries in 1973). Schrunk made urban renewal a major priority for the city, and he saw in Keller the kind of hard-driving commitment PDC needed to rid the inner city of increasing blight.

PDC was an autonomous city agency created by a 1958 voter-approved city measure, and Keller was its chair for thirteen and a half years. The South Auditorium Urban Renewal project—including the civic auditorium and the Forecourt, Lovejoy, and Pettygrove Fountains—was PDC's most noteworthy achievement under Keller's leadership. Portland historian Carl Abbott credits Keller's "enormous energy" for making urban renewal work in Portland.

Not everyone was enamored of urban renewal, however, because it destroyed established ethnic neighborhoods and forced people from their homes, and not everyone appreciated the bulldozer manner with which Keller carried out his goals.

In January 1972, Keller resigned as PDC chair after the City Club of Portland recommended abolishing the commission as an independent agency. The City Club urged that a city department take over Portland's urban renewal program to ensure that a higher priority would be given to lower-income housing. (As of 2010, PDC remained an independent agency with major projects and program changes subject to review by the Portland City Council.)

During his years in Oregon, Keller was president of Western Corrugated, vice chair of the board of Willamette Industries, a director of the Western Forestry Association, and a trustee of Oregon State University Foundation. He was founder and chair emeritus of the Foundation of Oregon Research and Education board, chair of the Oregon Graduate Center for Study and Research, and the first chair of the advisory council of the University of Oregon Health Sciences Center.

The Forecourt Fountain was renamed for Ira Keller in 1978, the year he died, while the Civic Auditorium was renamed for him after Ira's son, Robert B. Keller, donated $1.5 million for the auditorium's renovation in 2000.

Written by Jewel Lansing

Further Reading:

Abbott, Carl. *Portland: Planning, Politics, and Growth in a Twentieth-Century City*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983.

Lansing, Jewel, *Portland: People, Politics, and Power, 1851-2001*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2003.

Portland Development Commission. www.pdc.us/about_pdc/history.asp.

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